

LISTENING FROM THE HEART; Witness in Northern Uganda

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Setting the Stage: Being Friends

This is the story of being faithful in following the threads of friendship. 25 years ago my husband Chuck made a new friend. Her name was Abitimo and they met at an early childhood workshop. She was from Uganda, but the family had fled the dictator Idi Amin, and they were living as refugees in Philadelphia. Her children started coming to the play groups Chuck ran, and I got to know them too. I loved her warmth and the light in her eyes. I was very happy to be her friend.

We got to know more of her story. Abitimo had started out with the idea of revenge; Idi Amin had killed a lot of people and she wanted to kill him. But she discovered that planning revenge didn't make her happy, and gradually she got the idea of building for peace by working with the children.

Some years after Idi Amin's dictatorship fell, she went back to Uganda, looking for a place to make a difference. There was still unrest in the country. Groups of ex-army soldiers were roaming around, and a civil war was brewing in the north where she lived. One day she saw a group of orphans alone and unattended, amusing themselves by playing war games. She decided, right then and there, to take those orphans in, and start a school where they could learn something other than war.

This has been mostly Abitimo's story so far, but it gets to be ours too. Her children were still in Philadelphia and she came back every year. Chuck taught her peer counseling, introduced her to our friends and continued to hang out with the children as they grew into adults. I became her editor-in-chief—polishing her fundraising letters and creating little brochures about the school, which is called UNFAT. I remember the first pictures we used—of a little class standing in front of a round hut made of home-made bricks with a pointy thatched roof of grass. Just playing that little role made me feel a sense of connection. In a small way her work got to be our work too.

The years passed. Abitimo's school grew. A new grade was added every year. The civil war also got worse. For a while the school met in the railroad station, which had been abandoned because of the war. I never saw pictures of that place. Then they got land of their own, and the pictures I used in the brochures were of rectangular brick classroom blocks with holes for doors and windows. There were more and more war orphans. The fundraising letters I edited spoke of hoping to provide a meal in the middle of the day so the children wouldn't be so hungry. It was hard, holding a situation of such heartbreak and need in our hearts, trying to be good friends and doing so little. But it looked like that's the role we could play—and it least it was not nothing.

Then in 2005 I read a piece in the paper by a member of the Inquirer's op-ed board, calling for people to get involved in stopping Joseph Kony, the rebel leader in the north. It was a revelation. I didn't know that anybody in the whole United States besides me or Chuck had ever heard of Joseph Kony. Maybe we were not so alone. I wrote a note to this reporter, whose name is Caroline, asking if she'd like to meet a Ugandan family in Philadelphia with ties to the north. Abitimo was back in Uganda, but we had stayed friends with her children Aaron and Patrick. Caroline did want to meet them—and I think the five minutes I spent writing that little note might have been the most important five minutes of my life. Caroline ended up going to Northern Uganda for a month, and doing a five-day feature in the paper, including a big spread on Abitimo and her school.

All of a sudden there were lots of people in Philadelphia feeling a connection with Uganda, wanting to do something. This new energy caught me off balance. I'd gotten so used to feeling like we were in this alone. It made me wonder if we'd been holding this friendship too close. Could we have shared more, sooner? Or was it just that way had opened?

But here we were. A group of us got together with Abitimo and her family and started a new organization—Friends of UNIFAT. Caroline's husband joined, and another refugee from Uganda.

One couple, Mike and Jill, who had gotten involved through the articles in the paper, turned out to be amazing fundraisers. A whole network of Catholic schools in Cincinnati got involved, through Mike's connection with his high-school alma mater. Chuck and I, who are so used to being the ones to make things happen, now found ourselves panting to keep up, trying to build the infrastructure of the group fast enough to harness all this new energy. Money was coming in. New classrooms were going up. Scholarships for orphans were being raised.

For years Abitimo had been asking us to visit, but we kept putting it off. The idea of traveling to an active civil war zone sent little chills up my spine. Hearing that you could find out, once you got to the capital city, whether or not the road to the north was safe, did not reassure me. Surely we could be more useful safely at home. Looking back, it's hard to know if this was lack of faithfulness or just good sense.

But now there were peace talks underway. Nobody was being shot. The thousands of children who had been walking hours every evening to sleep in Gulu town to escape the danger of nighttime abductions by the rebel army were now sleeping safely at home. We made our plans. Chuck found the three emptiest weeks in his calendar. I worked extra hours for the airfare and saved up vacation days. We decided to travel with Abitimo's son Patrick, now grown, and his wife and three children, and our twenty-five year old son Timothy.

We didn't know what to expect, what would be possible. Could we help her identify new leaders for the school, prioritize fundraising goals, do workshops for the teachers in early childhood education? Could we teach peer counseling, do something to strengthen the work of trauma healing in the region? Could we make a video to use as an educational tool back home? It was like packing a tool box with every tool we could think of, not knowing which ones would turn out to be useful, or how way would open. We just knew it was time to go.

The preparation was a nightmare—trying to wade through conflicting information about immunizations, visas, currency exchange, fundraising procedures and deadlines, trying to do it all as a group, finding substitutes, rushing to complete all the work that would normally be done when we were away. Then it was a grueling trip—two nights on airplanes, then almost a whole bone-jarring day in a little bus over incredibly pot-holed and bumpy roads. Patrick's wife Irene had not made it on the plane at all, held up at the airport with passport complications. I asked myself many times why we were doing this. It would have been so much simpler to stay at home.

But when we saw Abitimo's smiling face at the end of the journey, I was reminded of why. It was because we were friends. And the next day when we were welcomed by thirty students and young adults, eager to learn peer counseling, ready to invite us into their hearts, I knew that we were going to be of use.

We were able to do many things. We offered this group and another group of young women, all facing grievous loss because of the war, ways to bring healing attention to each other and others. We got all the footage, interviews and sound for a video. We clarified financial procedures and funding priorities at the school and helped Abitimo identify promising new leaders. We learned of the needs of the youngest classes, worked in the library, and offered a few resources to those teachers. We actually ended up using almost all the tools in our toolbox—and we accumulated a long list of more things we could do when we got home.

But most of all we were friends. We were good friends to Abitimo, just by visiting, staying in her house, seeing, understanding and joining in to her life. We became friends with others in her family and with people at the school. We developed deep friendships with the young people— young men who had been taken for child soldiers, young women who had been abducted and were raising the children of rape, young people who had lost parents, siblings, young nieces and nephews. We listened to their stories, we told our own, we offered them the discipline of listening deeply, with warmth and confidence in the other's goodness. They came back with stories of

listening to others and lightening their loads, making a difference. We played games and laughed together. We hugged a lot.

So my story, which started with a single strand, a friendship with one woman, has grown to be a strong web of many strands. It has been joined by our friends and by Abitimo's family, both in Uganda and here at home. There are the folks in Philadelphia like Mike and Jill, who read the paper and were moved to action. There are high school students in Ohio whom I've never met, but are eager to have lives of meaning. There are teachers at UNIFAT school who feel joined in their struggle. There are young men and women of northern Uganda, already eager and loving, who now have more strength in numbers and more tools in their own toolbox as they go out to help heal their land.

It's not easy, this work of being friends. But in a way it's very simple.

From the Toolbox

We went to Uganda to support Abitimo Odongkara in her work in education and peace-building in civil-war ravaged northern Uganda, where 20,000 children have been abducted by the rebels, and over a million people forced into Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps.

I would say that our major contribution ended up being in building the capacity for trauma healing, the thing I wanted to do most, but thought was least likely. We are trained in a shared listening form of peer counseling, and had two distinct opportunities in this area that merged into one by our final weekend. The first was with a group of young people, ages 19-29, that a young man in Abitimo's household had gathered together (she has cared for countless war orphans over the years). Abitimo had taught them some of these shared listening skills and they were eager for more. Over the course of two weeks we met every weekday evening for almost three hours, with a group that would grow to the end to about 35. As it developed, Chuck offered formal information, demonstrations and opportunities to practice for the second part of our time together. Then I would be available the next day for the first hour to answer questions and hear people's stories of trying out what they had learned with friends and family.

The other opportunity grew from my discovery before we left home of a British Quaker project in northern Uganda supporting the efforts of a group of young mothers who are returned abductees, now reaching out to help other women in similar situations. The staff had been searching for ways to get them more counseling resource, and were delighted to take up our offer to share with the group what we know of peer counseling.

We did a five-hour introductory workshop with them late in our second week, then invited them to send two representatives from each of the five IDP camps where they work to join the students for a final weekend workshop. Both groups were very heartened to know of the other's shared passion for helping their people heal from trauma. They all expressed great appreciation for these tools, and had already started using them before we left. All in all, 62 people participated, and we developed a plan for ongoing teaching, support and leadership development.

A second area of work was in support of the UNIFAT school that now serves 1300, including over 350 HIV-AIDS and war orphans. UNIFAT has high academic standards, a dedicated staff, a mission to instill values as well as teach academics, and a strong concern to serve the oppressed. It has a reputation as the best primary school in the region, yet is still critically under-resourced. We got a better understanding of the school's financial status and needs, through in-depth conversations with Abitimo, the (very active and committed) board and parent/teacher association members, and the teaching and administrative staff. In addition, I worked with our son Timothy on conceptualizing the framework, getting the visual footage and doing the interviews to make a video. Since the story of the school is deeply embedded in the story of the last 20 years in northern Uganda, we hope to be able to use the video for general education as well as fundraising.

As an early childhood advocate by profession, I also came prepared to offer workshops and resources to the teachers of the youngest children. This led me to classrooms of 70 to 80 preschoolers, and a sad little library with shelves of culturally-inappropriate donated books. I ended up spending a lot of time in the library, weeding the picture book section and learning from the librarian about the pressing need for usable story books and texts. Most of the tools I came with presupposed a smaller teacher/child ratio, but I was able to offer one small workshop, and came away with a solid basis for education and fundraising in the early childhood community.

As her friends, we lived in Abitimo's house and came to understand her life in Uganda much better. We got to know her family, helped her problem solve and separate out and organize all the different projects she's engaged in, grieved with her over the loss of an adopted daughter to assassination last summer (most likely for her outspoken advocacy for the peace process). We

gained a new sense of her stature as an important elder, resource, and peacemaker in northern Uganda, helped strengthen her ability to do that work, and left with new ideas of what more we could do on her behalf.

It was an incredibly rich time. We learned an enormous amount, connected quickly and deeply with many people, did our best to be of use, and made some real, if small, contribution to peace and healing. We come home with much more to do, and look forward to binding our communities and loved ones in the US more closely to these passionate educators and peacemakers of northern Uganda.

To the Bone; The Journey

Bone weary after two night flights
we step off the plane in equatorial Africa
refresh ourselves in the cool of a colonial hotel
(I fret, impatient for reality)
then set off in our ragged little bus piled high with baggage
for the north.

Twenty years of civil war, unspeakable atrocities on both sides
have cut the north from normalcy.
The trip had seemed too risky till last year.
A shaky peace now holds.

Shake off fatigue, the war—here all is new.
Past the city center open air shops line the street
beds and chairs made and sold, car repair, food stalls
bikes piled high and wide, a multitude of taxi vans
then countryside—palms, big cactus trees
women walking, balancing their loads.

The road gets worse,
what used to be a three hour trip now stretched to five.
We slalom around potholes
veer off to the shoulder, try the other lane.
Relief at signs of road repair short lived—
stretches of graded earth and smooth new surface
have endless little piles of sand to slow us down.
Come almost to a stop, ease over one
then pick up speed in time to slow down for the next.
One section is like lace,
deep rounded potholes in a filigree of macadam.
Both lanes have been abandoned,
drivers opting for the rutted shoulder
as the quicker way.
Is there a plan to make this journey so bone jarring
so achingly slow
because it's headed north?

Five hours pass.
My hopes pin on the Nile, the border of the north
they say it's not far after that.
On and on and on till finally
we pass a town of refugees
safe below the river
hundreds of walkers line the road
first visible signs of war. I wonder how they live.

We crest a hill, catch sight of water.
Not my image of the Nile
cutting a wide green line through Egypt's sand.
This is a raging torrent, crashing round bends and over rocks
full of wild and dangerous beauty.
We slow for a picture, are stopped at once by soldiers.
Holding this bridge has kept the rebels pinned above.

The peace is not yet strong
and all our friends within are from the north.
Some of the soldiers strut and ogle, others talk
our friends respond, and helplessly we wait.
Money is passed up front, more talk
more money, and we're free to leave.
The young Americans who choose the Nile for kayaking
seem very innocent and far away.

We bump and jar into the night and the unknown--
and suddenly there's fire.
My mind is filled with war atrocities and burning huts
but no one screams or runs.
The fire burns peacefully
my fears a faint echo of those bone chilling times.

Gulu has become for me a town of dreams,
one to drive toward for eternity and never reach.
Then, abruptly, from one moment to the next
it takes shape, we're in its midst.
Nine hours, weary and wrenched to the bone
I step from the bus
see our friend's dear smiling face
look up to old Orion in the sky
and know I'm home.

Night Watch in Gulu

I can't sleep. The first two nights the fan kept us cool enough, but the electricity has gone out, and I lie here sweating. I've known hotter nights at home, but there I have a big breezy corner room and a fan, and if it's really bad, I can always find relief in a cold shower. Here, wedged in against the wall, to go anywhere I'd have to feel my way over my husband, under the mosquito net, then over my son who's taking up the rest of the space on the floor of this tiny room. In this strange house in total darkness, the bathroom seems an impossible goal.

I'm happy to be out of the hotel, happy to be crammed into Abitimo's house as part of her extended family. What a privilege it has been these last two days to meet with a group of young people who are eager to learn peer counseling, eager to play a role in healing their region from over twenty years of devastating civil war. What an incredible set of circumstances that has me, on my second day in this African country far from home, sitting in the late afternoon shade among ten or twelve groups of three, each listening intently as the others tell their life stories. One young man in my group touches my heart as he speaks shyly of past troubles. I find out later that many of these young people are orphans, most have lost loved ones to the war, and some had been abducted to be child soldiers.

It's so still. I can hear the sound of distant drumming. I wonder if there's been drumming on other nights, drowned out by the fan. I think of how the fan serves as a buffer to other noise, just as our distance and affluence buffers us from the lives of so many others. It's good to be able to hear. I wonder if this is just somebody's music, or if these drums are sending a message that is being received and understood.

There are atrocity stories here, but I don't have any to tell. Those are all other people's stories—stories of those who suffered and survived, of those who have to live with the unspeakable things they have done. There is an urgency about the trade of these stories. I understand the urge to tell them—to try to shatter complacency, shock people out of lethargy, spark outrage, make something happen. There is also the urge to hear—a fascination with horror, a compulsion to confirm our despair, or stoke the fires of inner guilt. But knowing the worst doesn't make anything better. We need to have our own stories.

The sound of a vehicle startles me. There is hardly ever a vehicle on this road, and it's the middle of the night. It stops very close to our compound. A series of scary possibilities race through my mind. But nothing happens. Again I'm alone in the night. I try to relax, discover that if I press up all the way against the wall I can feel a little coolness from the concrete.

My own story is a story of friendship with Abitimo, of loving her goodness and courage and vision, of following that thread of friendship, of one thing leading to another. I also have a story of meeting eager and open-faced young people, so ready to do their part to heal their beloved Acholi land, which has been caught for so long between a brutal rebel force and a national army eager to crush a troublesome ethnic group. They carry so much responsibility on their shoulders, so much love in their hearts. I get to tell a story full of hope.

A cell phone rings in the bedroom next door. Abitimo's son Patrick and his three children have traveled here with us from Philadelphia; his wife Irene was held up at the airport with passport troubles and missed the flight. Days later she's finally close to boarding, panicked that something still might go wrong, heedless of the hour in Uganda. His voice is steady, reassuring. It's not been easy for him either, not having her here. His shoulders are broad—they've had to bear a lot. I'm grateful for his presence. Abitimo was the beacon for us, but he provided the bridge that made this trip seem possible.

I'm still awake. I don't know why. I wonder if I will sleep at all tonight. I think of all that the people here have endured, and one sleepless night on my part doesn't begin to compare. As I

think about it, it's a ridiculously small price to pay for the access I've been given to the heart of this community, for the opportunity to stand with this people, for the chance to be of use.

I hear Abitimo coughing, then the sound of drowsy contented talk—the two grandchildren who sleep in her bed. The murmurs die down, and all is still again. A cock crows. And finally I sleep.

In a Strange Land

There are adventures to be had,
sights and sounds I'm eager to take in—
our first trip into Gulu town
the market at Soroti
country clan life in the east—
I know nothing, soak up all I can.

Routines to master—
When a woman holds a pitcher, offers soap
pours water on my hands into a bowl,
learning to be thorough without waste
of her time or the water
(toward the end, and less an honored guest,
being the one to pour),
Riding the bodaboda sideways on the back
finding where to put my hand to brace
against the bumps and turns.

Parts beyond my reach on this brief trip—
the language (though I dabble at the edge),
the grease the system needs to make it work.

Then things that catch me unawares—
The wind, whose rustle through the leaves
I've always known, feels wrong somehow.
It clatters in the palms,
and tall trees that should be cool and green
unbalance me with flowering flaming red.

It's what I think I know, but don't
that seems most strange.

Early Childhood Education in Northern Uganda; Facing the Impossible

I've spent time making developmentally appropriate materials—bright colored card-stock circles, squares and triangles with holed to thread shoelaces through—good for small motor development, color and shape identification and creating patterns. I've followed the advice of someone with expertise in war-torn districts of Indonesia. This should work for the youngest children at the primary school we'll be visiting in northern Uganda. I imagine how much pleasure the bright colors will bring, am pleased with my thoughtfulness in taking the time to make ten generous sets, so that there will be enough for several small groups.

Then I see the classroom for the three and a half to five year olds. It is brighter than the others, with homemade posters on the wall—wild birds, our bodies, transport—and cards with big letters and numbers strung around. But the layout is the same. Roughly plastered brick walls with two big holes for windows, a blackboard up front, and rows and rows of bench/desks. These children are small enough that four can fit easily at each desk. A grid on the chalkboard gives the day's attendance: 39 boys, 33 girls;; total: 72. Seventy two. Seventy two pre-schoolers in rows of desks facing front.

Forget about activity centers, forget about creative curriculum. Here there are no manipulatives, no art supplies, no materials or equipment of any kind for fine or gross motor development. There is nothing for the children to do but pay attention. And this is a private school, the best in northern Uganda, they say, one that people struggle to send their children to.

Any well-trained early childhood teacher from the US would take one look and declare the situation utterly impossible. These teachers, however, do not have that luxury. As I watch and listen, I am amazed at what they are able to do under these impossible conditions. There is a lot of call and response, a lot of singing. They have chants with arm motions that call the group to relative quiet and attention. A few of the children get to work at the blackboard, a few more are called up to dance to a song about the letters. The teachers are gentle, appreciative, generally not harsh—just very firmly in control. Clearly they use favorite songs and chants to give the children something active to do when they get restless. These also serve the purpose of giving a little practice in English (another one of the tasks in this classroom, in case they didn't already have enough!).

At one point there is a bustle in the classroom, as 72 slates and 72 pieces of chalk are distributed, to the children can practice the letter of the day. While the class has been run by one teacher up front, two others have been in the wings, and they now circulate, helping individual children as best they can. There are plenty of other times when more individual attention would help—little bumps and squabbles and acts of aggression, hurt looks and quiet tears. The teachers either don't see or have decided that they can't afford to intervene—the whole has to take priority over the parts. And there are also eager faces, children excited about being together, being led by someone who likes them, getting a chance to learn.

At snack time the little round plastic buckets that children have brought from home get distributed, then a woman brings in an enormous pot of porridge. Seventy two children wash hands at the spigot of a large barrel filled with water (they are very good about washing hands) and seventy two blue plastic cups of porridge are handed out.

The morning goes on. From noon till 12:30 there is relaxed non-instruction time, but the children don't go out because there isn't a good and safe place for them to play. Gradually parents or older siblings come to pick them up and take them home.

I talk with the teachers. They are acutely aware of the limitations of the situation. When I ask about what they need most, they say tables. If they had tables and chairs instead of these slanty

narrow bench/desks the children would have some work space. Manipulatives and art supplies could be considered.

Most of the training materials I've brought are irrelevant to the situation, insultingly impossible to caring teachers who are doing the best they can. I find one idea that might be useful—a way to invite children to think and share their thinking as a book is read aloud up front. It is received gratefully; clearly they want to best for these children. I start thinking of how I can raise money for tables. And I quietly back away by ten sets of brightly colored cardboard shapes and shoelaces to take home. Someday they may be the thing that's needed. But not yet.

Beggars and Choosers

I've come to the library of the best primary school in northern Uganda to find a simple story book to use for a little reading workshop with the teachers of the young children. I find two shelves crammed to overflowing with picture books donated by well-wishers from the west. This seems promising. But as I pull them out to investigate I begin to experience irritation, followed by disbelief, and growing despair. Pokemon and Barbie do their thing in print. The Berenstain Bears watch too much TV. The Care Bears help Santa Claus. 1950's era Dick and Jane play every so boringly in a lily-white environment. Cute kittens and mischievous mice have predictable adventures in pretty suburban houses full of modern appliances. I investigate the beginning chapter books: school children gross out their classmates, give their teachers trouble, angst over who has more stuff, and go on improbable high tech adventures with non-human pals. I want to throw up.

In this dingy little library, where the dust of the dry season coats everything, the aching poverty of the people is made even harder to witness by these shelves stuffed with bright shiny castaways from our impoverished culture. The students here come from families who don't have indoor plumbing or packaged food for the most part, much less TVs or toy stores. Parents' dearest wish is to scrape together enough money to send their children to school.

Where are the stories that are not full of western materialist assumptions or the white faces of privileged US children? Where are the stories they can begin to relate to? How can the modest little pamphlets with tales of Ugandan life that teach children to read compete for attention with these eye-catching books filled with bold colors, luxurious illustrations, and exotic seductive content?

A student comes into the library to collect the pitiful little pile of tattered texts that have to be shared among seventy or eighty classmates. At the end of the class they are brought back to the librarian to be carefully reshelfed for next time. He is acutely aware of their value, and has tried to repair some of the bindings with heavy paper and glue.

There's a dusty little shelf with stacks of papers so ragged that I could imagine taking my arm and sweeping them all straight into the trash. But the librarian gets there first. "These are our dictionaries," he says. "They are very good. You can see how worn they are; the children use them all the time." Now I want to cry.

He is wistful about their needs. It would be nice to have a few stools so the children could sit and read. He would be happy to get more reference books and world history. If people want to donate, it would be great if they could give 80 copies of a story book that is relevant to life in Africa. But what they could really use is money—money to make their own choices about appropriate texts and to buy enough for every child—rather than having to be grateful for the odds and ends we don't want anymore and feel so virtuous about throwing in their direction.

How has it happened that even in the act of giving, we who are rich get the feeling of virtue that we want, at no cost to ourselves, while they who are poor get neither what they want nor what they need? Now I'm ready to kill. Instead, I sort with a vengeance, putting Pokemon, Barbie, Care Bears, Kidzilla, Dick and Jane, and so many others into boxes to be discarded—or perhaps used as wipes in the latrine, so as not to go to waste. At least there will be less crap for them to have to be thankful for, and more space on the shelves for the time when they can get what they really need.

Telling Our Stories

We arrive in the only transport available—an ancient pick-up truck, the interior worn down to the metal, door handles to stubs, too many cracks in the windshield to count. Waiting to greet us in the late afternoon shade, is a group of young men and women. We've never been here, don't know any of these young people. Yet they know our friend and are eager to learn what we have to share about peer counseling. In less than an hour we are scattered around the yard in groups of three, sharing life stories.

The idea of taking turns listening to each other is pretty simple. I've done it tons of times. I listen to what's on your mind and you listen to what's on mine, without interruption, without criticism, without advice. If we get good attention, just the telling helps. If we have a chance to vent some of the feelings it helps even more. We get more space in our brains and in our hearts. I've listened to all kinds of stories—about hard days as work, love-life angst, fears about the future, hard times with children, hard times with parents, physical injuries, embarrassing moments. I've told my share as well.

But I've never done it in a dirt poor country in a region where civilians have borne the brunt of a horrible civil war for over twenty years. The process is just the same, but the stories are a little different. There is the young man who was abducted at age nine to serve in the rebel army and escaped at twelve, orphaned and stigmatized; another whose three little cousins were taken, the youngest one killed, the others returned years later, badly damaged; another trying to help a young woman from his village who was abducted and robbed of her childhood and is now raising an unwanted child of rape.

I don't know which is harder—providing a container for these stories, or taking my turn, with problems that feel inconsequential to the point of non-existence in comparison. I have to remind myself that it doesn't matter. They don't want my story to be as hard as theirs. They're pleased that we came from so far to visit, happy to get a little attention. They find the concept that they've been traumatized very helpful; it puts their personal experience into a larger context. The idea that healing can come from listening well to each other's stories and to the feelings that lie beneath is a powerful one. It gives them a new way of helping friends and loved ones. They are both challenged and intrigued by the idea of letting people find their own solutions. Mostly they are eager to be part of the healing process, eager to forgive, eager to let go of the past and look toward the future, eager to love.

For two weeks we meet with these young people daily. We find games to play that let us laugh together. They love giving and getting hugs. Individual personalities, strengths and passions begin to emerge. Stories of giving loving attention to others come back to us within days.

This process of taking turns listening and showing our caring, which has come to seem so ordinary in my life at home, here in northern Uganda has become something very special and precious indeed. I'm challenged to treasure it in all its stunning simplicity. I want to learn from my peers in Northern Uganda to cut through the layers of daily worry and irritation that are often the substance of my stories, down to what really matters, to the essentials of life that are so close to the surface here. I want my story to be one of accessing the deep well of love in my heart and putting it to the service of my world.

Love is love

The toddler's clothes are dirty
tattered past belief
his mother, missing teeth
is old before her time.
He runs out to a nearby tree
picks up a fallen flower
brings it back
with pure clean open heart
to give to his first love.

Perspectives on Colonialism

We drive north to Fort Baker. Abitimo is anxious to show us the sights—and there aren't that many to show in this war ravaged land. We bump over dirt roads for an hour then pull up in the little yard of one of the brick storefronts that are so common here: one story, with a façade that reminds me of the Alamo, or the old frontier towns, and a corrugated steel or cloth awning to provide shade in front for whatever business is being done. These and the little round mud-plastered brick houses with conical thatched roofs that are the traditional houses are the only kinds of buildings that we see in the north. This is where we pick up our guide.

The fort is nearby. It was built on an outcropping of rock, unusual in this flat land, that had certainly been used for defense over the ages. Our guide's story starts with the Arab slave traders of the mid-1800's, who came down the Nile from the Sudan to work this profitable trade. The heroes are the British, Sir Samuel Baker in particular, who drove the Arabs out in 1872. We get a detailed tour—of the out-buildings, lovingly restored by the dictator Idi Amin in the 1970's, of the moat, the storage areas, places where the slaves were herded, sorted, made to sleep, the bloody horror stories of how and where those who were unfit or troublesome were slaughtered.

I'm distracted by the sun. I burn so easily, it's midday, and there's not a cloud in this bright equatorial sky. Each time we come to a new place and pause for the next chapter, my first thought goes to where I can find a bit of shade—a tree, or an overhanging rock that I can crouch beneath.

I'm also distracted by what I've been reading on the colonial history of this area. One author has mentioned the Arab slavers and Sir Samuel Baker. He identifies the former as a scourge, but points out somewhat acidly that after chasing them out, Baker set up an administrative system under Egyptian rule, that was equally as harsh and oppressive to the local population.

I am touched by the earnestness of this guide. In a country without a traditional written language, stone building materials or metal implements, history can feel elusive. It's easy to see how something as concrete as this pile of rock and a record of what happened here 150 years ago has value to him. And I'm made acutely aware, once again, of the bias against the north in the national government since the 1980's. This site has had no government support. Rather, it is the local district, reeling from war and with hardly any resources to call its own, that has taken on itself to preserve and tend to this bit of Uganda's history.

But the glorification of the British sticks in my throat. Having them as the heroes seems to just add weight to the myth of the white man's burden, to the lost glory and goodness of the days when Britain ruled the world. I'm willing to give local pride in Fort Baker its due, and always ready to condemn slavery, but I stand firm in my anti-colonial point of view.

Later in our stay I have the opportunity to read more East African history. The expanse and nature of the Arab slave trade of the 1800's is laid out in more detail. It is a chilling story. As an American, everything I had learned about slavery focused on the West African coast, and the Atlantic slave trade. Yet that of the East African coast was equally extensive, cold-blooded and devastating. Villages were burned to the ground and all the inhabitants enslaved, with high percentages dying on the grueling trip to the coast. Merchant ships from France and the Arab countries made enormous profits from this trade, and slavers penetrated ever more deeply into the interior (with this part of what is now Uganda being among the latest to be reached). As far as I can tell from what I read, Britain actually seems to have played a principled role through diplomatic and economic pressure, in standing against and slowing this process.

The alternative in East Africa in the late 1800's was not between European colonialism and indigenous self rule. Somebody was going to take advantage of these small loosely-organized communities without modern arms. The alternative was between European colonialism, with all the consequences we know, and increasing dominance by powerful Arab forces, the consequences of which we can only imagine. I am humbled, my easy ill-informed prejudice exposed.

I think back to our trip to Fort Baker. We look out from this pile of rock to two even bigger hills on either side. On a clear day, our guide says, you can see all the way north to the Sudan. The rebels used this place as a lookout, till the government realized its strategic importance and flushed them out. At this point it is peaceful. Looking the other way, we can see the cluster of round huts of the IDP camp, then empty land stretching all around. On the trip up we saw signs of people beginning to move back—piles of fresh thatch by the roadside, a few new foundations.

History has been hard here. There have been many oppressors, few heroes. Perhaps this very lack of heroes can be of use. My heart goes out to these people who are not interested in winning wars, having dominion over others, or wielding power. They know the cost. They are interested in cultivating their land, and living at peace.

War and Livelihood

The effects of war here are not the strong visuals we've come to expect from the media: the charred wreckage of buildings, tanks and overturned military vehicles by the side of the road, twisted metal, gaping craters. It is what can't be seen here that is the most telling sign: mango trees dotting the countryside with no little round house underneath. This very emptiness is the heartbreak: over two million people who depend on the land forced to leave, cut off from their means of livelihood.

Some have tried to stay on the land, but the soldiers want them out of the countryside, so they can be free to shoot anything that moves, and the rebels have roamed freely, coming in the night to abduct children for their army. Others have tried to continue to farm their land from the IDP camps, but with military restrictions on the camps, they have limited freedom to move, limited hours to get to their fields and back. (Even in town, life is still organized so that people can get home before dark.) Much of the good land in northern Uganda has been lying fallow for twenty years—and a congested, relief-based, idle, vice-ridden camp life has taken its place.

Some people have moved out of the region entirely, to areas south of the Nile where the rebels were not able to penetrate. They congregate in hastily constructed buildings lining the side of the road, trying to scrape by. It was startling, when we traveled south and east, out of the civil war zone, to see little houses scattered around the countryside, and see people pursuing their normal everyday work. What a contrast to the vast emptiness of the north, punctuated at long intervals by the clogged mass of huts of one of the camps.

The only growing sector of the economy in the north is the NGO sector, the non-governmental organizations that have sprung up in the region in response to growing international awareness of the humanitarian crisis of the civil war. They say there are 300 NGOs in Gulu town alone. Almost all the vehicles in town, aside from the ever-present motorcycle taxis, or bodabodas, are NGO cars—big powerful white 4-wheel drives. The neighborhood we live in is full of NGOs. It used to be a wealthy part of town—there was even a golf course for the white folks, Abitimo says. But the well-to-do had the option of leaving when security broke down, and most of the buildings have been taken over by NGOs: UNICEF, UN High Commission on Refugees, groups working on malaria reduction, child health and welfare, vocational training, rehabilitation, microfinance.

The big old buildings and occasional NGO cars are the only sign of the wealth that used to be here. It took me a few days of walking to realize that some of these back roads used to be paved, back in the time when money was spent on infrastructure. There is still a ragged dusty strip of pot-holed macadam in the middle, but the sides have worn steadily away. (Thoughtful pedestrians walk down the middle of such a road, since cars are a rarity, and the bodaboda boys prefer the relative smoothness of the dirt at the edge.) Another eerie reminder of a more affluent past is the set of two-story western-looking buildings with satellite dishes sticking out the sides that used to house military families. After no maintenance for twenty years, they look like the worst of our public housing.

Many of the enterprising young Ugandans we have met are working with the NGOs. While lots of good work is being done, we wonder at some of these outfits. The skill of some seems to be more in raising money by pulling heartstrings at home than in tapping into the local community infrastructure to spend it usefully here. The NGO sector has the feeling of a boom town, sprung up quickly in response to unusual circumstances, liable to sudden collapse. I worry about what other work the bright and dedicated young people we've met will find when the crisis is over and the NGOs go home.

Then there is the question of livelihood for ex-soldiers. From the beginning of colonial history, this region was seen as backward, and identified as a source of migrant labor and army recruits. The ethnic groups of the more highly centralized kingdoms of the south, in contrast, were

groomed to run the machinery of colonial administration and rise in its ranks. So Acholi men served in great numbers in World War II, and through a series of ethnically-charged coups and counter-revolutions, thousands of career soldiers from the north had periods of power and times of being on the losing side. Since the Acholi have been out of favor with the central government since the mid 1980's, these ex-soldiers have been seen as the enemy. What do such people, used to money and power and coercion, do when they return home unemployed? They violate the local population and foment civil unrest.

The Holy Spirit Movement of the mid 1980's was a creative indigenous response to this crisis in northern Uganda. Through a tradition of spirit mediums, Alice Lakwena raised an army to fight a holy Christian war against the twin evils of predatory soldiers in the north and an oppressive government in the south. Her plan, or the plan of the spirit Lakwena who spoke through her, was to purify the soldiers and send them into battle without intentional killing, believing that the pure ones (on either side) would be protected. While the Holy Spirit Movement was ultimately wiped out, it had many unlikely successes. It can also be credited with a rigorous morality for its troops, and an equally rigorous protocol of treating civilians fairly and with respect. Westerners can easily scoff, dismissing the whole movement as a bunch of charlatanism and magical nonsense, but the goodness of the intention, in the face of a very real problem, shines through.

Abitimo has her own story to tell about idle and violent returned soldiers. A little later than the Holy Spirit Movement, some of these men were causing trouble in the Gulu district, attacking women as they walked to town, stripping them naked, taking their things. She gathered some women together to speak out against these attacks, carried out by people in families that they knew. These women gathered others and organized a big march through town, calling out the names of those involved. Evidently the negative publicity was sufficiently unwelcome that the attacks stopped.

But it was a small victory. Northern Uganda is facing an even more challenging situation now, with the return of child soldiers, taken when they were young, many forced to kill or be killed, spending years in the bush before escaping or being returned. Some of the young men that I spoke with said that it really made a difference how long they were in the bush. If it was just two or three years, and they were still young, you could get them back, but after eight or ten, it was a real struggle. One guy said that a friend of his, who had been in the bush for eight years returned and tried to make it back in the village. But he had been badly damaged, and was so stigmatized and targeted for what he had done that he ended up going back to the bush. There are thousands of returned child soldiers who have gone through a rehabilitation process, but still bring significant residual trauma back to the families and camps and villages to which they return. Several thousand more are still in the bush, the questionable attraction of civilian life not great enough to lure them back.

We have our own issues in the US. The armed forces are being heavily promoted to young people with few other prospects for livelihood. And we have yet to get our minds and hearts around the human costs, not only of the waging of war, but of the trauma and violence that our returning soldiers are bringing home.

Flowers Fall

Quiet and kind
under a tropical tree
in shabby elegance
at this old inn,
a place of refuge
in a ragged war-torn town,
he speaks of cyanide
assassination
sifting evidence and motives
while pink flowers fall.

Scotland Yard then Kenya
for many years a private eye and mind
he has experience and skill,
can open doors and find things out
in face of heavy silence from the law.

He has grown to care
about this life cut down,
this bright spirit
who spoke the truth about the war,
refused to play it safe.
A rising star
our Margaret
made lesser lights seem dim.

His measured kindness steadies us
and we entrust the search for truth
to his good hands.
A weight is lifted,
as another flower falls
and lies in quiet loveliness
on dusty ground.

Game Park Interlude

After all the starts and stops that I've come to expect as we prepare to set off on a journey, we are ready to leave the gas station, fortified with a full tank, money, air time for the cell phones, juice, the newspaper, a case of bottled water and a picnic lunch (brought from home). We had been sidelined by a stop at the local craft shop and some impromptu shopping through the window of the van—great long stirring ladles, made by hand from wood from somebody's back yard, but on consideration, a little too big; squares of lace that came from who knows where, but are part of what this man is carrying, and just what Irene has been looking for. They negotiate a price that pleases her, she takes them through the window and tucks them into her bag, and we pull out of town heading west.

It's another bone-jolting ride on dirt roads. I've learned to make sense of the rhythms of this countryside—great expanses of empty land with virtually no signs of habitation, interspersed with the dense huts of IDP camps. We pass through the most forested areas I have seen in the north. Abitimo says that the rebels were particularly active in this area because of all the cover. I strain to see signs of habitation in this lonely land.

We hit the paved road that leads to the game park, but within just a few miles come to an official looking sign directing us off to the left. We are skeptical, but a local assures us that this is a good road to get there. It's more of a track, taking us directly through the middle of an IDP camp. Little round huts that belong by themselves out in the countryside, each under their own mango tree, are jammed up on top of each other. Some of the roofs are covered with plastic. I remember hearing stories of fire in the camps, how the soldiers, or the rebels would set one on fire, and the flames from the burning thatch would spread from one hut to the next, destroying what little these people had managed to save and scrape together. There must have been fire here.

There are clothes spread out on roofs to dry, some pigs, a lot of little children, women gathered in spots of shade, a latrine thrown together from pieces of scrap metal, one saying "USA". People smile and wave as we ease our way through on this rutted path.

Once past the camp, the situation looks no more promising. We scan the road, if one could call it that, for signs that other vehicles have been on it, see some faint indications, and continue on, trusting in the report that this was a good road. It goes on and on. We eat our picnic lunch, carefully wiping our hands first, and seeing the wipes come away brown with the dust that is everywhere. It is chicken--there must be one less in the compound today—and the ever-present bottled water that we drink so much.

After about an hour, no signs, no building, no crossroads, no other vehicles, we come to a bar across the road—the entry to the game park. After a bit a man comes down to let us through, and we start seeing animals almost immediately. What a thrill! Four different kinds of deer and antelope, warthogs with their babies, big birds, then a giraffe in the distance, water buffalo, even a glimpse of an elephant. It's like being in the middle of one of those nature shows on public TV. We come to a fork in the road—no sign. For some reason the driver chooses to go left. As we drive on and on, I calculate how long it will take to retrace our steps if it was the wrong turn. But he was right. We crest a ridge and see the River Nile laid out below, then come to the very fancy resort that we can't afford, then the booking place and the ferry.

Abitimo bargains with the man who handles bookings. Her guests from the US, she argues, have been doing important work in Gulu; they have been supporting local institutions for years. They deserve honorary Ugandan status. Evidently she is persuasive enough; I am impressed. An enormous crane stalks around the kiosk with maps and animal photos, and a baboon family, complete with little baby on mother's back, investigates the litter bin.

We pick up a guide and head out the way we came in for a real tour. He knows just where to go, and it gets even better. An elephant comes up close enough to scare us, and two giraffes amble across the road right in front. Great expanses of rolling open land spread around on every side. We head down closer to the river to look for lions. There's an incredible feeling of peace in this expanse of low tawny grass dotted with trees. I choose to believe that there are lions there watching us, invisible in the grass.

We ask how this game park could be carved out of so much seemingly arable land. Abitimo says that the British had originally planned to locate Gulu town here, on the banks of the Nile (white people having this thing about building settlements by rivers, she adds with a twinkle), but the tse-tse flies forced them to reconsider. There are settlements right on the edge of the park and poaching has been a problem. The rhinos are gone, though a breeding program and plans for repopulation are underway. Tourism is not a concept that makes much sense to those trying to live off the land. Attempts are being made to change this, by plowing a percentage of the game park's tourist income back into the local villages, hopefully providing a greater buffer for the wildlife.

We're back to the booking place on the river in time to catch the last ferry. I can't help but think of our first Nile crossing, on the trip north from Kampala that now seems so long ago—the crashing danger of whitewater and the menacing threat of soldiers. This is a different Nile, calm and quiet. Ours is the only car on the ferry, and we cross under a serene and lovely sunset.

The Red Chilli Rest Camp is funky, but there is good food out under a great thatched patio roof, toilets that flush, and the first mirror I've seen in over two weeks. And white people. I haven't seen so many white people since the London airport. It's disorienting. Timothy suggests that we talk in Spanish, try to pass as Mexicans. The power goes off in the middle of the night. We wonder if it's a fluke, or if they turn it off every night after the fans have cooled down the rooms, to save electricity.

After a very British breakfast of tea with bread and jam, the morning boat ride down the Nile is another serene and lovely time. It is still and smooth, with more wonderful birds, and crowds of hippos and crocodiles. We find hippos and crocs sun bathing together on

one sand bar. Though baby hippos would make a tasty meal, the crocs prefer fish, and the hippos seem to know it. We are told that this water safari has no equal and we can believe it.

Back in the car we eat up the hardboiled egg and chappatis that the Red Chilli packed for us, washed down by water that Chuck had thought to filter from the running water in the cabins into bottles he'd saved from dinner last night. Once again the roads are narrow, dirt, unrelieved by any other signs of human presence. This side of the Nile has fewer animals, but provides access to the incredible falls out of Lake Albert—all the force of the Nile crashing through a seven-meter cleft in the rock. It is the most powerful force of water in the world, sending spray three stories high. We can look down the river to where our boat had to turn around this morning, to the peaceful water beyond. It is an awesome sight, and we linger. Some care has been taken to welcome visitors—a picnic pavilion, tidy little latrine, signs and steps leading down to the view, railings and warning signs. But we are absolutely alone. There are no other cars, no ranger, no buildings, no souvenirs or snacks. It's just us and this incredible place.

Piling back in the van, we discover that we're down to our last bottle of water. The food from lunch is long gone. We have to wind our way back to the place we turned off for the falls before heading south and out of the park. It's hilly and the road is badly washed out in places. Two or three times we come to a stretch where it has been paved for several hundred feet, just enough to make the combination of hill and curve passable. The land appears to be completely empty. We hit the main road, still dirt, but wider. Passing through a forested area, I see the great thick looping vines that call up visions of Tarzan. At other places it is all grass interspersed with trees. The grass has a bluish shade that makes it look a little unreal. Termite mounds dot the landscape like great orangy-brown sand castles far from the shore. I too am far from home. After more than three hours, no buildings, just one other car, we arrive at the gate that marks the edge of the park. There is a little souvenir shop where we eagerly buy dusty bottles of soda and water from a low shelf in the back, too grateful for anything wet to complain about its warmth.

Through the gate, the change is instantaneous. There are people on the road again, houses. There will be food. I soak up these signs of ordinary human life, breathe a sigh of relief. The game park has been wild in more ways than one. It's an adventure I wouldn't have wanted to miss, but I have to acknowledge that I, who am general so scornful of tourist amenities, have finally met my match.

Livelihood and Education

Our visit to Irene's family home brings to the fore issues of livelihood and education. They live in Eastern Uganda, in the shadow of Mt. Elgon, which divides the country from Kenya. We pass through the bustling city of Mbale, with its Islamic influence, elegant big central building dating from the 1930's and 40's, deep into the countryside, off the paved road, then off onto a narrower dirt road. The land is richer here than in the north, the vegetation lush.

We pass a small cluster of houses, old men and women, ragged little children sitting outside. The houses are mostly what I think of as daub and wattle—a framework of thin poles, filled in with dried earth—roofs of banana leaf thatch. Then there's a group gathered around a bore-hole with its hand pump, and all the big rectangular yellow plastic containers that are used for water throughout the country. We've been traveling all day, and Irene's children are impatient. Finally, not far up the hill past the borehole, we pull into a clearing with something akin to a lawn, and a substantial house of concrete block.

We are welcomed warmly and invited in. The living room has the two stuffed arm chairs and a couch that seem to be the standard here—we saw a long line of shops manufacturing them outside of Kampala—piles of wood, frames stacked two or three high on bicycles, finished products for sale—all the same style. There's a dining room table and chairs in the adjoining room. It's evening now, and I'm a little surprised that they don't turn on the lights, till it becomes clear that there are none to turn on. After a while an oil lantern is produced. We sit in guestly elegance, while the life of the household is clearly somewhere else, if the sound of chickens and chatter is any indication. Dinner is very late and there is some confusion about washing before bed. The offer is made, but we are bone tired, and the job of finding the latrine in the darkness seems sufficiently challenging—we have no idea what a wash would involve. There had been a bustle of getting mosquito nets before we came, since this is a wetter part of the country and the dry season is coming to an end. But the room we're showed to has no way to hang a net. We sleep without them and hope for the best.

Everything is clearer in the light of morning. Life indeed centers behind the house, in a little separate kitchen and under the trees. The latrine is a tidy little building with two doors and a pan of water and soap outside. Inside is a flat piece of wood covering a hole, with a pole attached to lift it aside, and toilet paper hanging on a nail. The only tricky part is squatting in the right alignment to the hole. (Later in the trip I see an abandoned concrete latrine floor standing on its side in the storage area of a school. It has the footprints that would have helped me out.) Bathing, we discover, is a straightforward matter of retiring to a closed off area with soap and a bowl of water heated over the fire.

There are a series of little outbuildings, chickens scratching, and three or four goats tethered here and there. An uncle shows me around, identifying all the fruit trees—mango, guava, jackfruit, banana—and pointing out the coffee bushes. He explains the traffic on the road—men on bicycles going up the hill toward the banana plantation, and bicycles with huge loads of bananas on the back coming down the hill headed to markets in Mbale and Tororo, over an hour's car drive away. The man leading a goat up the hill is on his way to the weekly market not far beyond.

Later we get a much more extensive tour with two older uncles. Uncle James seems to be the main farmer. He has a little one-room banana leaf thatched house not far from the big one; a skeleton of poles out front are the beginning of an addition. The house is surrounded by banana trees—they have both the cooking and the sweet eating kind. There are also trees good for firewood and timber. Farther down is a planting of cassava, then closer to the stream more intensive vegetable production, then sugarcane. There are some new cabbage seedlings protected from the sun by a woven reed awning, then larger heads mixed in with tomato plants. We are followed by a growing number of small children, all ragged, several with hoes, some chewing sugar cane. Clearly we have interrupted their work.

We learn that Irene's father moved to this place, up from the little cluster of houses we passed on the way where his clan is centered. He wanted to be closer to this stream, though they still have to go down to the bore hole for drinking water. After he died, the family supported themselves by growing cotton, all the children working to pick and clean it and selling it to the cotton gin next door. Then the bottom fell out of the cotton market. Those who were higher in the hills switched to coffee, but it doesn't really grow well here. People are mostly farming for subsistence now; if they can sell enough surplus it will help cover school costs.

Luckily for Irene's family, she had an older brother who got a job with the police, and was determined to help his younger brothers and sisters go to school. They did, and Irene ended up in the United States working as a nursing assistant in an old folks home. She sends money home, her other siblings help as well, and these extra resources have allowed the house to be built, and more land to be acquired for the farm. With this little extra cushion they seem to have all that they need—and significantly more than their neighbors.

Irene's coming has provided the excuse for a family reunion. All of her siblings have shown up, and all the nieces and nephews who aren't away at boarding school. The young adults are all well dressed, going to university or working at white collar jobs in Kampala (one of the uncles works in Kampala too, but in construction). When a ten year old is asked what he wants to do when he grows up, he says "work in an office".

This is the upward mobility that everyone hopes for. It is sweet to watch the family together—the love is palpable. They are happy to do without electricity, haul water, cook over an open fire in the corner of the smoky little kitchen during this joyful reunion. But who, after going to university, will be happy to haul and cook that way every day? Who will come back and tend the land after Uncle James has died? I watch him on the last morning sharpening his machete on a stone, then stripping and cutting sugar cane for us to take back to Gulu—so effortless, so much knowledge in his hands. We weren't there when he slaughtered the goat, but I can see it in my mind's eye. His skills are so important for feeding this country, feeding this world.

I guess the ragged little neighbor children with their hoes will grow up to be ragged adults who get by somehow on a little plot of this productive land. But for this farming family that has built up some little buffer from extreme poverty, it looks as if the very goodness of the life they have created, with its opportunities for education, will leave it without a future.

I see a similar trend in the north, just compounded by war, drier land and greater poverty. The students perform a play for us. It is about an old peasant and his two sons. One is getting the land; the other is getting an education. The old man uses all his wiles to keep the first son at work and away from school, talking about how lucky he is to be the master of all this land. The son chafes, pouts, acts up. He knows he's getting the short end of the stick.

All the young people we meet have pinned their hopes on education. Unlike Irene's nieces and nephews, many of them are orphans. They have no money, no siblings with jobs, certainly no resource from the US. Yet they are waiting, hoping somehow that they can find someone who will pay their school tuition so that they can build a future for themselves that's more than just scraping by.

As people begin to taste the possibility of peace, the more adventurous ones are leaving the camps, venturing back to the land, dismantling the little huts in the IDP camps and using the bricks to rebuild the traditional round homes with peaked thatch roofs that used to dot the countryside. This seems deeply right and very hopeful. Yet it is not a future that anybody we met looks forward to. What can make life on the land sufficiently tolerable that it is something to imagine doing as one's job after getting some education, rather than consigning it to those who have no other choice?

Sustainability; Before and After the Age of Oil

Walking around Irene's family's farm, we can see all the ways that it is a model of sustainability, a living example of the kind of future that many far-sighted people in the west are working hard to make possible. The notion of perma-culture, using the land fully so that all parts work together to complement and support each other, is laid out in front of us in all its elegance and simplicity. I know people from the west who would feel like they had died and gone to heaven if they had a chance to get their hands on this place. Fruit trees are interspersed with trees for firewood, construction and timber. Below the taller mantle are the coffee bushes, then the goats and chickens that feed off what drops from above and grows low below. Their waste goes back into the soil. Banana palms provide food, both essential carbohydrates and sugar, and their big leaves are used in endless variations for holding and covering stuff when fresh and for roofing when dry. Sunny land is suitable for vegetables and cotton. There is no dependence on pesticides or fossil fuels. The water at the nearby bore hole is hand pumped; the bicycle is the basic means of local transportation.

What would it mean to take full advantage of this living example of life after oil? What are the sustainable inputs that could make this kind of life more productive and less arduous? We sit under the trees behind the house with the great uncles—the ones, along with Irene's mother, who own and depend on this land. The conversation is full of speeches of welcome and thanks (we weren't quite aware of the honor we were conferring on this family simply by showing up; it seems likely that no white person has ever been in their community before). They hope we can help them; we try to respond appropriately while being clear about how little power we hold in the US. It gradually begins to sink in that they have no contact at all with anybody who is working on appropriate technology or sustainability. They can't even begin to know what a next step for their community might be because they have no frame of reference wider than their own experience.

I think of all the people I know who have studied and experimented. I think of the tremendous resource I have in the internet—I can start with a single word or question, and whole new worlds are opened up to me in seconds. I begin to wonder what I know, or could find out about, that would actually be of use. (They are intrigued by the pistachio nuts we have brought as a gift, and wonder if they might be a good cash crop. We promise to investigate, but I'm doubtful.)

Could there be something with solar panels? Something about the water? Some simple food processing techniques? Watching the women cook gives us our first real idea. The kitchen is a small pole and dried earth structure with one corner devoted to the fire. Big stones have been arranged so that there are three distinct places for pots and ways to get firewood under them. Smoke fills the room and filters through the holes in the walls and the thatch of the roof. (This is where the water for our baths was heated.) Even a simple modification, that my son knows about from his work in Nicaragua, would get most of the smoke out of the room. We wonder if this was the kind of idea the uncles were looking for; the women would certainly benefit. Maybe half a dozen ideas like that would help them imagine new possibilities, and choose what would work for them.

What could be done to make this life less arduous without going the big oil route? I think of those men up before dawn on their bicycles, riding for miles to the plantations, loading up enormous heavy loads of bananas, and riding miles again to distant markets. There is road drainage and grading work being done by the district government nearby—no access to heavy equipment, so a crowd of laborers work with hoes. The bicyclists have to dismount, balance those loads and push through loose dirt. I can feel their muscles straining. They need the work. Is there a way it could be less toilsome?

I wonder about the roads. We were on a few that were well-paved and maintained. The vast majority were dirt, rutted and washed out in places, ribbed like washboards in others, and full of dust. But these were easier to bear than the surfaced roads that had fallen into disrepair, which seemed to be the majority (or maybe we just spent most of our time in the part of the country whose infrastructure was not the central government's priority). These roads were a penance to be on. Going into the potholes was damagingly jarring to body and vehicle alike; going around them was a feat of driving, requiring slaloms, scary use of the opposing lane, time on the shoulder, and, when none of these remedies worked, slowing down almost to a stop to ease into an enormous pothole and back out again. There was one stretch of road where the potholes were so deep and numerous that drivers both ways abandoned the road altogether in favor of the rutted dirt shoulder. We saw ragged little boys on the main north-south highway filling in potholes with dirt, trying to get a little money from bone-jarred drivers for their effort. Our son, with his long experience in Nicaragua, said that bad dirt roads were almost always preferable to bad paved ones. Assuming limited resources, what can we learn?

Bicycles are so well used here. They are a great form of transport. In Mbale they are used as taxis, with a bright rectangular cushion on the back, decorated with golden fringe. They can carry everything: children on the back, chickens over the handlebars, bed frames, sugar cane, water cans, charcoal. I needed to have one load explained to me. It looked like regular old thatch, but was bundled differently somehow. Turns out it was a load of rooftops—each sheaf of dried grass bound tightly at one end with what looked like tire rubber, made to be spread out like an umbrella to crown a conical thatched roof. What a great product, elegant, functional and sustainable, and what a perfect mode of transport!

Their latrines are another example of earth-friendly technology. Human waste clearly belongs in the earth and nothing could be more wasteful of water than a flush toilet. A clean and well-kept latrine is not a disgusting thing. Outside the public latrines at the game park was a little peak-roofed barrel of water on a stand, with a spigot at the bottom and a bar of soap in a tray—a perfectly appropriate system for handwashing. (Though I have to say that the blue-green dyed toilet paper without perforations was a mystery to me. I hadn't realized that anybody still dyed toilet paper, and I discovered that I really do like the convenience of perforations; I guess it was better than nothing, which we also experienced.)

There are advantages and disadvantages to being several decades behind the modern world. One can only hope that some of the most wasteful practices of the west will be discredited before they even get introduced here—like excessive packaging and plastic bags. There was hardly any packaged food in the middle class household on the edge of town where we lived—some tea and

jam, and boxes of fruit juices and bread for the children from America. In the pantry were big bags of groundnuts, flour, sugar and millet. Cassava harvested from a nearby field lay drying in the compound. Fresh cabbage and eggs were bought from the market. The chicken and goats wandered around underfoot.

On the other hand, they have just discovered the convenience of bottled water—just as we are learning its cost and trying to wean ourselves from it. Since water from most sources has to be boiled, and it's *hot* most of the time, buying bottled water, if you have the means, becomes incredibly attractive. Though we saw very little trash, water bottles were the most common content. Some thought is put to recycling. When we passed children from the camps on the road out of town, Abitimo suggested that we hand our empties out the window to them. For somebody who has nothing, a good container can be a treasure. And local honey was sold in the market in recycled water bottles. All the soda is in glass, and the bottle has real value. Either you pay for it above and beyond the cost of the soda, or you drink the contents and return the bottle to its owner. Now that seems smart.

It took us a while on our long drive north the first day to identify the contents of the big tall bags that were everywhere by the side of the road and on the backs of bikes—clearly an important commodity of some kind to be produced, bought and sold. Timothy figured it out from his time in Nicaragua: charcoal. I worried about that charcoal. If some people need to eat, and they can make a little money by cutting down a tree and selling it for fuel, the logic for cutting down that tree is pretty compelling. But how long will it take till all the trees are cut down and people still don't have enough to eat? I read a paper while we were here about using sugar cane waste as an alternative base for charcoal. This sounded promising, since it could be applied to other natural waste as well. The kicker was that it required a medium to hold together the carbonized sugar-cane stalks, and what they suggested was cassava flour. Is there enough cassava flour to spare from eating, at a cost that could compete with the trees? At least I'm glad that there are people in the world who are thinking about alternatives.

On the other hand, the brick kilns that we saw by the side of the road everywhere we went were appropriate technology at its most elegant. People dug up the red clay that is everywhere, shaped it into bricks, piled the sun-dried bricks into block towers with open channels at the bottom for fire, coated the whole thing with mud, lit a fire overnight, let it bake in that heat for three days, took off the coating, and voila: building materials. The hollowed out palm logs that are wedged into trees and attract swarms of bees seemed like another example of local elegance.

In the north, which has savannah-type vegetation, the Acholi build round houses with this brick on a raised clay floor, pounded hard to the consistency of tile, topped by a grass-thatched roof. They can be remarkably clean and spacious inside. In the southeast, which is wetter and more tree-covered, the houses are rectangular pole construction, with a lattice of thinner poles and dried clay and the occasional brick worked in to the gaps, and a banana leaf roof. These houses fit their environment. They make sense.

I wonder about the water at the bore hole wells, the hand-pump, the ubiquitous big yellow plastic containers that carry it from well to dwelling. Waiting for hours at the well, or carrying water for miles and miles, seems like a hardship that should be remedied. But does the good life require running water inside each home? Can the carrying of water become a small enough part of people's days that it makes sense? How much time could I imagine carrying water myself in a world of the future where we are learning to do without oil? As we look around us, what do we see that is a relict of a poverty-ridden past, desperately needing to be dragged into the present? What do we see that is crying out for sustainable technology innovations that modern research has made possible? And what do we see that is true wisdom from centuries of experience and a signpost for a livable future?

Country Color

The palette of this countryside is muted
all grayish green or dusty brown
no flower beds, bright signs or paint.

Then suddenly
an exuberance of color—
school children
in bright uniforms
deep green, rich yellow
eye-popping combinations
purple and turquoise, blue and pink.

Hundreds of flowers
in sudden bloom along the roadside
breaking the monochrome
bursting with life.

Ethnicity, Identity and Oppression

The sense of shared identity is strong here in the north. We stayed overnight down in Kampala with a couple who had moved there from Gulu and were quite well-to-do. I asked what language they used with their housekeeper, and they said Acholi. She was from the north, and had come with them. They had never bothered to learn the local language, because if they weren't speaking Acholi they could always get by in English. Even in this far-away setting, this potential melting pot, their ethnic identity was intact.

There is a common culture. All the houses look the same. It was noticeable when we traveled to the southeast, how the houses changed. First they got smaller with less exterior decoration in different colors of clay, pointier roofs, wider eaves and little porch-like extensions around the perimeter. Then as we got to the far southeast of the country, round houses disappeared almost altogether. The rectangular boxes that we started seeing were very disorienting; I could imagine them being culturally shocking.

There is a tightly-defined naming structure. The names are very distinctive—almost all male names, for example, begin with O, and people are vigilant to make sure that they are spelled right. We learn that the first born twin is Ochen if a boy, Achen if a girl. The second-born twin is Opiyo, or Apiyo. The children after a twin is Okello, or Akello. (I wonder if there are more twins there than here!) One young man who was given a Muslim name, but was not an active believer, had it changed to a more traditional Acholi name (Okello) so that he would not be always seen as different and outside. One of our host's nieces has chosen to change her given name to one that is more pleasing to her ear. But if she uses that name when she takes her high school exams, it becomes legal forever after, and nobody will be able to tell that she's Acholi. This grieves our host.

Physical similarities seem striking as well. I was in despair at the beginning of our stay, with every name an unfamiliar variation on "o" or "a", and a sea of facial features and skin colors that seemed indistinguishable. It didn't help that most of the women had hair almost as short as the men's. I clung to the Christian names, that I could at least remember a little more easily, though I still struggled to match them with faces. Of course individuals became more and more distinct as our time together grew, but it seems likely that physical resemblance is part of the shared genetic pool that comes with geographic separation.

I wonder how people in other parts of Uganda know that somebody is from the north. Do they see striking physical characteristics (for which I had little basis of comparison), or is it the names—or something else? Clearly people are identifiable as Acholi. Castine spoke with me in full righteous indignation about the way people from the north are treated in the south. He spent some time in high school in Kampala and described a system of discrimination, with Acholi students consistently graded lower and punished more severely for similar, or lesser, infractions. He saw it as racism, and fiercely defended the Acholi youth who were mistreated—calling them the best behaved, the most hardworking, the least troublesome.

One way in which people are not the same these days is in their religion, but that is a fairly recent phenomenon, growing out of colonial history. Active, and sometimes fiercely competitive, missionary work by the Catholics, Church of England, and, more recently Pentecostal Christian sects has led to a diverse religious identity. We witnessed deep Christian faith as an integral part of daily life. Almost all the secondary schools are Catholic; the one we worked at is unusual in the region, as it is not affiliated with any denomination. It would wish to be seen as equally welcoming to all religions, but in practice, while not explicitly Catholic or Protestant, it is very Christian. Though we met only one man in Gulu who had been raised Muslim, Islam is more common in other parts of the country. As we traveled east, we saw more mosques and Muslim dress on the street.

The young man who gathered together the group that we spent time with, teaching peer counseling, was very happy to be working with this practice that had no roots in any denomination. Much of the humanitarian work in the north is associated with different religious sects. But with this counseling there could be no reason, based on religion, for anybody to feel more or less ownership, comfort, or identity with the process.

But religion was the exception. The strong sense of shared identity that we witnessed would seem to require strong roots. It was fascinating to read about the history of the people who lived in this region, and discover that there wasn't even a common language or governance structure till the early 1800's, and the name Acholi wasn't used till the 1870's, when the British were trying to distinguish one group from another. It was only in rubbing up against people whom they were not, i.e., the cattle-herders of the arid northeast, or the tight kingdoms of the south, that these people of the north came to see themselves as having a common identity.

Colonialism was the force that solidified their ethnicity. The British chose one language group in the south to govern, and identified the north as a source of unskilled labor. This set whole groups of people up on very different trajectories and set the stage for political conflicts after independence that became closely aligned with regional/ethnic identity. The high percentage of Acholi men who served in World War II and then the army of the first president has been a critical factor in the fortunes of the north since independence. The current president fought against these forces to win power, each side has seen the other as hostile ever since, and this is a major reason why the civil war has been so intractable. So long as the central government can contain the fighting in the north, with relatively light losses of army troops, and with damage to civilians limited to the Acholi, it hasn't felt any great urgency to resolve the conflict. So the north has suffered atrocities for decades, and the rest of the country has gone on as normal, happy to consign the north to a hazy and unreal status of "other".

What must it be like to be marginalized this way, to have your whole experience rendered invisible? No wonder Castine feels isolated, discounted, mistreated. No wonder the sense of ethnic identity has been so strong. The Acholi people understand the concept of oppression. They are passionate about how good they, despite what other people say. And they take a fierce pride in their traditions and culture.

That pride can slip into disparagement of others. When we returned from our trip to the east, where traditional houses are made of poles and dried earth, we heard disparaging remarks about "those people". Here in the north, we were told, people know how to build houses right. The floors are raised, pounded hard, to the consistency of tile, the exteriors finished. Those people don't seem to care—they just put up houses any which way. I had to wonder: how can you be proud without having to be better than someone else?

Yet I saw that kind of pride when they danced. Watching the youth at the school, then the young adults, do traditional dancing was a revelation. People we had known in a very western context—well-behaved English-speaking students in a school based on the British colonial model, well-dressed young adults eager to learn what we westerners had to offer—became fully Acholi. They danced to an insistent central drumbeat, men in an outside circle, women inside. They sang, they called out, they drummed, they leapt and stooped and stomped. And they had such a good time. People would get pulled in from the watchers. One person would think of another song/dance they hadn't done yet, call out the first line, and everyone would join in. They hammed it up at times. They laughed. And they, and everyone who watched, were liberated to be proud and free as a group in a way that we hadn't seen before, a way that looked very, very good.

Rights, Respect and Responsibility

Ojara Sunday Braxton is a thoughtful young man, very tuned in to the role of the traditional elders, and not inclined to dismiss them lightly. He sees how effective the traditional system has been in conflict resolution. Yet he also sees that some of the traditions need to change. He speaks of how women have been oppressed in the traditional culture, and of taboos that are strange beyond understanding. (If a prospective bride is seen eating chicken, for example, she is sent away in disgrace.) He wonders if we have found a better balance between tradition and change. I say that I think we're in danger of going overboard on the side of change.

In their culture it is the responsibility of the aunts and uncles to train boys and girls to play their respective roles as adults. What do we do in the US? When I talk about the strong emphasis on individualism, and the nuclear family as the conveyor of values in our country, he sees problems with the lack of strong extended families. He asks how the oppressive parts of the traditional culture can change without losing what has value? I ask if he could have these conversations with the elders. He has access to the elders in his family, but not the chief elders of the whole district.

He and others pose questions about responsibility: What to do about a marital/property dispute that ends up with someone calling the army/police and somebody else getting killed? Who is responsible? What about the family where the wife has gotten a well-paying job, stops playing the traditional role in the house, and is hardly even around, causing the husband to be increasingly upset?

Omona Richard wonders what to do about two clans in conflict after a wrong report from one family to the rebel army led them to massacre many in one clan, who then forced the other clan off the land. Members of that clan want to be allowed back, yet traditional justice requires the whole clan to be responsible for one member's misdeeds.

The traditional justice system is very clear and carefully thought out—based on compensation rather than retribution, with clans being responsible for their members. When the process has been completed, the issue is over and people can move on. It has worked well in the past, but is

straining in its interface with modern institutions and pressures. In this last situation the younger generation of both clans are willing to be flexible—welcoming back all the clans except the offending family—but the elders are more rigid. The younger generation is working together to convince the elders—the war produced so many injustices—perhaps they can bend. It is a hard situation, but I can just picture Omona Richard's steady calm good will helping to make something good happen.

A major sticking point in the peace talks has been rebel leader Joseph Kony's unwillingness to be tried by the International Criminal Court for war crimes. While nobody doubts his guilt, the Acholi people are willing to abide by their traditional system of redressing grievances, which involves some measure of compensation, theoretically from his clan, and a clean start. From an individualist western perspective this seems like a terrible miscarriage of justice, with the one person who was most recognizably responsible for horrendous crimes going virtually free. For the Acholi, it would mean an end to war—a chance to return to their homes, plant their crops, be free from the terrible scourge of war. When you hold the guilt of one man against the well-being of a whole people, our insistent western focus on individual responsibility seems short-sighted at best.

We have heard several stories of the damaging impact of the IDP camps on traditional family structure. Evening times at home with family and elders where traditional values can be reinforced, have been disrupted. Instead, youth have been thrown together into a chaotic, undisciplined and dangerous environment, and exposed to the dregs of western video and music culture. There is more than one reason that people are dying to get out of the camps.

The extended family has clearly served a critical role in Northern Uganda, and other parts of Africa, as families have been decimated by the double scourge of war and HIV-AIDS. While there are thousands and thousands of orphans, most are quietly absorbed into existing families. When I finally do a tally of the number of parentless children living in Abitimo's compound, I come up with five girls and five boys, along with three of her grandchildren. Her sister speaks of having one child and eight dependents (she sounds weary). When we meet with a group of young women who had been abducted by the rebels and have come home with young children, they describe their families: one of my own, two others; two of my own, three others. Not one of them is caring for just her own.

You see the importance of extended family in other less dramatic ways. Our entire group stops to wait and wait when we discover that a cousin is in Kampala needing a ride north and we have room to offer. When Abitimo's adopted daughter died last summer, two members of the family her US-based son married into traveled across the country over terrible roads to represent the family at the funeral.

We come home one evening to find a goat tied in the compound. Some distant relative has died, and as part of the mourning process a goat has been presented to the family. As the senior female member she is the one to receive it and see that the meat is distributed appropriately. (She isn't thrilled; it is one more thing to do, and since the billy had never been castrated, the meat will be tough.)

There are strengths in extended families and clans where people watch out for each other. A country of many different tightly-knit language/ethnic groups brings problems as well. Patrick has married into a different ethnic group. I feel so sad that the only language he and his wife share is English. I listen to him speak to his mother in his native tongue, then turn to use the colonial language to communicate with Irene. Needless to say, the children speak only English. Patrick also faces a hard situation with his mother-in-law. The custom in those clans is that the husband has no contact with his wife's mother. Even entering her house is considered inappropriate and rude. Customs are changing and it now works for him to be in the same house, though without verbal contact and keeping across the room. Where did this tradition come from? What use can

it possible serve in the present? Does his desire to know his mother-in-law threaten the traditional order?

Then there is Felix, with an Acholi mother and a Gisu father. When his father kicked his mother out of the house, she went back to the north and raised him there. Her family has tolerated his presence, but has not welcomed him in, certainly not claimed him as one of theirs. He has visited his father's family once or twice, but is seen as an outsider there as well. He has worked hard to be thoughtful about and generous to members of his mother's family, trying to win their trust, and he is planning to buy land in his father's village, as a way of claiming his own space there. What a hard job for a young man, just trying to be a good and loving son and to have a home.

The current president, Museveni, has established a political system with the professed intent of combating the tribalism that plagues a multi-party system. Parties get so identified with tribes/ethnic groups that the political process easily devolves into tribal conflict. His solution has been to ban parties. People are expected to run as individuals on their own merits. There is something thoughtful and right about this, and some evidence that it works at the local level, where competent individuals can be identified and respected. But on a national level, one can't help but wonder. With no alternative locus of organizing strength, the incumbent has an enormous advantage. While he can talk virtuously of transcending tribal differences, he has also used this no-party system to his personal advantage: he has been in power now for 21 years.

Our little microcosm of Gulu seems more hopeful. It is good to see a genuine elder in action—to watch people listen to her, defer to the wisdom they recognize in her, be led by her. It is very good to listen to these thoughtful young men struggling with the question of how to maintain respect for the elders, while still having the opportunity to learn new things and help their traditions evolve. There's something about respect here that they really understand.

The Dry Season

Dusty school uniforms
dusty, dusty feet
shoes parked at the door
to keep the worst of it out.

Dust on the roads
roll up the windows when cars go by
pity the ones on bicycle or foot
even so dust in your eyes
your mouth your hair
wipe your face or hands, the sweat is brown.

Quixotic tries at mastery
sweeping the dusty compound
wiping seats off with a handkerchief--
I put my trust in a dust-colored skirt.

Dust in the dusty little library
coating every book
hands give evidence of my labor
like working in the fields.

In other forms this dust can be of use:
bricks shaped and baked from local earth
in little kilns that line the roads
house floors raised, pounded hard,
special clay rubbed in till they're like tile
earth planted to crops, providing sustenance.
Now it just lies fine and blows.

In two long days of driving, heading home
my hair has taken on the rich red brown
I used to know, a bittersweet good-bye.
I find I do not want
to wash this fine Ugandan dust away.

The Road to Kampala

As we bump back down the road from hell, headed toward Kampala and the airport, there is plenty of time for reflection. Though we've only just touched the surface of this country, we've taken in an enormous amount.

There is the role of women. I was shocked when we finally arrived for dinner at a traditional Ugandan home. The women went down on their knees to say hello. I had read something in the paper about a female member of parliament answering the question of whether she still kneeled for her husband, so I had the idea that there was something here, but it sure was unsettling to see it in real life. When I was visiting a pre-school classroom, at the break a beautiful little girl in a what looked to me like a fancy party dress (all the little girls who had one seemed to wear these fancy dresses all the time) came up to me, kneeled and put out her hand. I couldn't decide if I was more touched or appalled.

In the student and young adult group that we spent time with every day, sharing skills in listening and peer counseling, the women and men seemed to interact with a degree of equality and respect that I found reassuring. But the women were much, much quieter, and when we talked about oppression, it was clear that the idea of equality had not been around long, that they were breaking a new path for their gender. Several of the young men asked me, in private conversations, about our practice of mixed gender pairs exchanging listening time. While they were comfortable doing it with these women, out in the yard in public, they foresaw lots of problems convincing parents and other adults that this could be appropriate behavior. We strategized about what could make such a situation workable—talking with parents beforehand, staying in very public places.

The young women returned abductees who joined the student group from the IDP camps for the final peer counseling workshop that we led, felt inferior and out of place in many ways. They keenly felt their lack of education, their lack of English. Higher education is clearly the driving force behind the changing roles of women. But I wonder how much it was hard for them, with so much experience of brutal gender oppression, just to be in the presence of so many men.

It was good to see our friend Abitimo as a respected female elder. It was good to see effective and committed female teachers. It was good to see women on bikes (though in the minority) and even an occasional woman in the driver's seat of a motorcycle. Perhaps it was best to see the young women from the camps, though still burdened and limited by many traditional forces, determined to play a role in helping their sisters.

There is education. Formal education is an institution that came in with colonialism, and functions on a very British model. There are "do or die" exams at the end of primary and secondary school that basically determine a person's future. Universal primary education was mandated in the late 1990's, an enlightened step that just needs to be undergirded by adequate funding. (We heard of primary schools out in the country where the teachers came for a few hours a day, or just a couple of times a week. What, we wondered, did the children do the rest of the time?) Secondary education is entirely private and beyond the reach of most. Access to university is even more limited. Even the best schools are underfunded, with large classrooms, few resources, and high dependence on rote unison response.

We heard of an innovative experiment in the Karamojong cattle-herding region of the east, where the government was stymied by parents who simply refused to send their children to school. The parents had asked why it was that schooling made their children run away from their homes and made them disrespectful to their elders. Why did children leave primary school apparently lost and incapable of doing anything—unable to construct a house, look after animals, or even make a stool to sit on? (Ian Leggett, *Uganda; An Oxfam Country Profile*) So the government developed an alternative model that built on local customs and resources, welcomed the whole

family, and emphasized interactive participation. I am glad they never experienced the colonial model, and can't help but applaud these parents for holding out for something more sensible; I wish the rest of the country could imagine such an alternative model.

The Ministry of Education had recently decreed that every school hold elections for student officers, as training in democracy. We witnessed quite a touching "open air campaign" where seven or eight hundred third through seventh graders gathered in the shade of the school's two largest trees, enthusiastically waving little branches as earnest boys and girls told why they would be good at playing a role with the library, cleanliness or sports.

There is health and human welfare. We read about and saw signs of a very vigorous national campaign against HIV-AIDS. Rates are said to be steadily dropping—though progress against it has been slowest in the north where investment of all kinds has been hindered by the politics of war. We saw hospitals, big in places, always poor. We saw clumps of people on the grounds waiting and preparing food, sheets hung out to dry, an indication of how much care falls on the families. A westerner in an NGO spoke of the depth of mental illness that had come with the trauma of war in the north. The fact that many people equated such trauma symptoms with possession by evil spirits meant increased stigmatization.

There was evidence in many places of a vigorous hand-washing campaign. I've never washed my hands so often in my life, and it occurred to me after a while that the lack of towels was not really a problem. Shaking hands dry was more sustainable than paper, more hygienic than sharing cloth. And eating with your fingers is not a health issue if your hands are clean.

Much of the social service work appears to be done by international NGOs—and that's certainly true in the north. We heard that the current president is very savvy in courting international lending agencies and managing aid, which forms a significant part of the national budget. One can only hope that some of this investment is bringing value that will last.

Employment is overwhelmingly agrarian, though we heard that there were a few large factories in the south. Heading out of Kampala we saw small cottage and service industries—a row of furniture manufactures, with beds and chairs in all stages from wood to finished products, a row of auto repair shops filled with used parts—all doing business out in front of small shops. In the countryside, the cottage industries changed to charcoal production, brickmaking, papyrus mat-making, and harvesting of grass for thatch—all those goods available for sale along the road. In Gulu there were lots of little communications businesses—offering phone, typing, internet, fax and reproduction services.

Retail can be seen everywhere, from the fast food entrepreneurs at busy highway intersections (any vehicle that slowed down would be mobbed in seconds by vendors of fruit, meat kabobs, fried cassava, ground nuts, and water), to the traditional markets with hundreds of tiny stalls selling local produce, rope and baskets, cheap imported goods, to the general stores with the few packaged products that could be found. The major employers in the north are the NGOs that have moved in to address the humanitarian crisis. We could also see how an institution like UNIFAT school was a significant employer, when you added up the teachers, administrative staff, cooks and cleaners and watchmen, and the full time carpenter and tailor.

There is infrastructure, or lack thereof, which shows the effects of poverty and decades of political tumult since independence (though the last 20 years have allowed some recover in the nation as a whole). The rail system, developed in colonial times, is now largely abandoned. The roads are in terrible shape (though it's hard to know which is more aggravating—the enormous potholes, or the speed bumps repair crews put up to slow drivers on still-curing surfaces. My reflections are interrupted on the worst stretch of this road. In order to feel like we have some control we start counting speed bumps. We'd be happy to stop at fifty, or even a nice round hundred. But no, there are 196 in one stretch of only fifteen or twenty miles.

I wish for public toilets. With such basic infrastructure needs, their absence is not surprising. But the lack of gas stations and convenience stores outside of big cities makes long trips a challenge. We finally learned that you just have to stop at one of the clusters of little brick commercial buildings that dot the side of the road, and ask. Someone will lead you around back, where all the women and children are, past the yard to their latrine.

I've noticed my western assumptions around government. Bribery is shocking, as is the lack of traffic control. In the countryside, where there is less traffic, it's not so big a problem. At one point, where our lane was closed for resurfacing, with tree branches laid across it at short intervals for emphasis, we simply appropriated the on-coming lane, only having to give way once in miles. But on the outskirts of Kampala this evening our lane is blocked by road work, the oncoming traffic is steady, and there is nobody to direct those drivers to give us a turn—I start to seriously wonder if we'll be there all night.

I think of all the images I've taken in during the last three weeks of the traditional jostling with the modern. Gas station attendants in smart uniforms bend over, sweeping the dust with brooms made from a generous handful of dried grass. A well-dressed woman walking down a dirt road greets a male acquaintance with a curtsy; the suitcase on her head stays perfectly balanced. We sit in Abitimo's living room, chatting with one of her nephews, articulate and self-assured about his work with an NGO in the nearby town of Kitgum. His wife sits quietly on a mat at the doorway with two young children, making no move to be introduced or participate. When the children get restless she pulls out a cell-phone-like toy that makes very loud electronic sounds.

A young boy at a little weekly market of subsistence farmers deep in the countryside proudly shows us the flashlight he has made with a bulb and a battery, and wire wrapped around a stick. The supervisor of the student teacher in the K1 class comes in to observe. She sits by the doorway leafing through a sheaf of official looking papers, the feet of the little baby wrapped on her back sticking out in front on either side. A woman at a communications café in town sits out front working at one of the two manual typewriters there, and nursing a baby. A small boy walks down a long lonely country road with a little plastic water bottle on his head.

Cell phones are everywhere and people are thrilled with this means of being in touch. If most of the country has skipped over the era of land line infrastructure entirely, they have probably saved tons of money. On the other hand, while solar panels seem like a natural, without a dependable electrical grid the battery capacity to store their power becomes a significant financial hurdle. The logic of sharing a resource like computers at internet cafes is inescapable. But the ones in these cafes are excruciatingly slow and hard to navigate; Tim says they're ten years behind Nicaragua. I wouldn't hold out the one-computer-per-person model that we seem to be striving for in the US (personally convenient though it is). Rather, I'd lobby for a system of really good internet cafes for everyone.

We've seen the gamut of wealth, from the big new houses of the political insiders going up in Kampala to the destitution of the camps in the north. But except for very richest enclaves, there is little that is recognizable by US standards. The very middle class house we lived in has the luxury of electricity and running water, though both go off a lot. Air conditioning seems as far away as the moon. There is no kitchen; food is cooked (by others) on a simple wood-burning brick stove at the other end of the compound. There are no mirrors, no wastebaskets. When I ask where I should throw a piece of paper that I've used up completely, I learn that it still has value, as an alternative to toilet paper in the latrine by the kitchen. When we do a day-long peer counseling workshop, nobody can afford to contribute much toward food and there's no other source of money, so we have big mounds of thick corn-flour mush and boiled beans, eaten with our fingers.

How do we bring our western identity to such a foreign place? In one way it's salutary to remember that we're not the center of the world. Reading the Ugandan paper, there is a nod to

the US presidential campaign, but British soccer gets more play, and they care much more about their own people and problems than they do about us. At a supermarket in the town of Soroti (the only one we've come across), we find sugar-coated cereal from Italy, canned tomatoes from Dubai, Weetabix and digestive biscuits from Britain, silverware from China, local doughnuts, nothing recognizable as from the US.

But it's so clear that we have more. At the school it's good to see so many orphans supported by western philanthropies; it's good that money has been raised to offer lunch. Our picture book donations to the library, however, make me want to gag—so clearly castoffs, and so inappropriate to this place. They've been given old computers that nobody's been able yet to get working. But one teenage girl, who was the recipient of enormous US sympathy and generosity in helping her recover from terrible war-inflicted burns, was given the latest in lap-top computers—while the director, the bursar, and the librarian of the school that scholarships her all manage without. The generosity seems so random, so thoughtless.

We've had to think a lot about privilege. Buying dozens of necklaces from the woman with HIV-AIDS that Abitimo knows will help her, and can help leverage more donations for scholarships back home. The certificate we gave to those who completed the peer counseling training would probably be worth nothing at home; here just the US address might leverage some small opening. Toward the end of our visit, people started taking us aside, asking if we can help with their high school or university tuition. The need is so pressing; they would be crazy not to try. (There are many less straightforward strategies; somebody told us with disgust of religious sects that sprout up in order to seek a connection with their counterparts in the west, thinly-disguised entrepreneurial schemes to tap into the flow of dollars.)

It's been hard. We're glad that we have no big money to hand out, no careers to dangle. We focus on what they can offer to us—take in their friendship, appreciate their culture, start learning their language, where even the lowliest cleaning lady is the expert. While we'll continue to raise money for the school, we try to remember that the most valuable thing we can give while we're here is our friendship. The skills in listening that we offer have real value—and it's a thrill to see people recognize it—but there's no money involved.

Almost to Kampala, we come across the bustle of the trading centers at night, with crowds, taxi vans, traffic jams, oil lamps and candles in the more makeshift stalls out front, electricity in the stores behind. They say this night life goes on till 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. It feels very modern, and I'm already nostalgic for the relative agrarian innocence of the north. When we finally arrive at our friends' place in Kapala, where we stay overnight on our way home, it seems impossibly luxurious compared to what we've known for the last three weeks. Then we miss our connection in London and get put up by the airline at a very posh hotel. Now that's the wealth that westerners are used to; we can tell that we're almost home.

Ties that Bind

As Gulu town recedes into the distance
and we are on our way
I feel the ties that bind us there
begin to stretch.

Are they strong enough to hold?
Will the tied ends come undone
fly apart and flap loose in the wind?
Will the stretch require too much--
will they snap and leave us jolted and apart?
Will they just grow ever thinner
till they have no substance
like old cobwebs to be brushed away?

All I care about these days it seems
is strengthening those ties
securing knots
twisting in new strands to make them strong
throwing my love across the ocean
over and over again
making a place for the hearts
thrown back my way
cultivating stretchiness, resilience
calling others to this work of
weaving cables, building bridges, binding hearts.

To the Bone; Returning Home

There is something spare in Northern Uganda that I value. People are engaging with the basics: We want to live. We need to forgive. Our people are suffering and we need a better way. The essential structure of life is exposed.

Would I choose to live this way all the time? Probably not. People whose bones rub against each other without any cushioning are in pain. But, while some cushion helps, is it always better to have more? After all, there can be such a thing as too many cushions. It gets hard to move. Ultimately you suffocate. Obesity has finally come on our country's radar screen as an issue; how can we address the fat of our material culture as well? How can we become more spare, more able to see and know the value of the basic structures that sustain us? How can we cultivate an ability to discern and delight in what is central and what is enough?

There were many opportunities here to engage with the question of what is most basic to life. A young man in our group probed what I thought pointed to the central weakness of what we were offering. Why would people in the camps want to take time to learn listening skills when what they really need is the capacity to earn a living and get food? Coming well-fed and without food to offer, I felt vulnerable to this question and struggled for a response that would satisfy us both. It's certainly not the whole answer, I said, and it won't be for everybody, but maybe you can find the people in the camps who see this need for healing, who can use these skills to help free up space in people's minds and hearts to think well about those other pressing needs.

It felt pretty lame. But then I remembered being surprised by surveys done years ago in other African countries that had been shattered and impoverished by war. People were asked what they needed most. It seemed like a no-brainer. Food security, you would say immediately. Economic development. They said we need trauma healing. We can't care about eating, work, the future, if we're consumed by these demons that have been visited upon us. First we need to be made whole. If these people are to be trusted, then listening from the heart really is at the core of what we have to offer, and what we need.

A wise Ugandan elder had something similar to say. "If we can notice that another human being is there on our side, caring about us, then we can handle these hard situations better, even if we can't solve them right away. So if you want to help us, think about us and pray for us and love us", she said. "That's like having millions of dollars. It doesn't cost money, but love from you to us could take us a long way."

I think it works both ways. We need help too. The material poverty of our western culture comes cluttered with televisions and electrical appliances and junk food. Our spiritual poverty grows from the belief that more of the same will fill us up. We find ourselves fat and hungry at the same time. We're confused, casting around more and more wildly for what will satisfy.

There's something simpler about being hungry and lean. It's easier to identify what we're hungry for. We need food. We need to love and be loved. We need a life of meaning. It is heartening to find other people in very different places and circumstances who know that they need the same things. One may not come before the other. But when we can keep this spare structure in mind, and remember what we're really hungry for, we'll have a better chance of being fed.